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SUBJECT: AUSTRIAN MEDIA HIGHLIGHTS: January 26, 2007

#### Molter, Platter tough on Strache Photos

¶1. Unlike Chancellor Alfred Gusenbauer (SPOe), Vice-Chancellor Wilhelm Molterer has harshly criticized FP0e boss Heinz-Christian Strache's "war games pictures." Such images, Molterer underscored, "could not simply be dismissed as some foolish action" Strache committed as a youth. Similarly, should pictures surface showing Strache giving a Nazi salute - something the FP0e boss did not rule out entirely earlier this week -- he should resign as Freedom Party leader immediately, Defense Minister Norbert Darabos from the SPOe told centrist daily Die Presse.

#### Dispute over Unions Election

¶2. The head of the Public Services Union, Fritz Neugebauer, a member of the People's Party has threatened to take action against the Austrian Trade Unions Federation OeGB after he was voted out of his position as a board member at the Federation's annual congress, which ended Wednesday. In a subsequent television interview he said there would be "consequences" and blamed "concerted action" by the Social Democratic unions for his sacking. OeGB President Rudolf Hundstorfer and Neugebauer are to meet today to discuss the issue, according to semi-official daily Wiener Zeitung. All Austrian media continue to report on the quarrel that has erupted within the Austrian unions, when Public Services Union head Fritz Neugebauer of the OeVP accused the SPOe of a "concerted action" after he was voted out of his position as an OeGB board member. Independent provincial daily Salzburger Nachrichten like most Austrian media suggests the events could lead to a split within the OeGB: The Public Services Union is said to be contemplating what the daily describes as "de facto secession." OeGB President Rudolf Hundstorfer is meanwhile trying to smooth the waters.

#### EU Constitution Supporters Meet in Spain

¶3. Ministers from 18 European Union countries, including Austria, are meeting in Madrid today in an effort to revive the EU Constitution treaty. All EU members represented have ratified the Constitution and want it to enter into force with as few changes as possible. Spain's Minister for Europe, Alberto Navarro, stressed it was time Europe heard from those who support the Constitution. The Madrid meeting has angered the treaty's critics, however, who say the issue threatens to divide the EU, independent provincial daily Salzburger Nachrichten says.

14. An Austrian daily publishes a guest commentary by US Ambassador to Austria Susan McCaw on President George Bush's new Iraq strategy and her impressions of her trip to Erbil as a member of the delegation on board the Austrian Airlines promotion flight to the northern Iraqi city.

In a guest commentary in mass-circulation tabloid Kronen Zeitung, US Ambassador to Austria Susan McCaw outlines President Bush's Iraq strategy, saying that according to the President's view, "our most urgent task is to stabilize security in Baghdad," an assessment shared by the Iraqi government. Unfortunately, the Iraqi government is "not yet equipped to tackle this problem alone, and current U.S. and Coalition force levels are not sufficient to maintain order. That is why President Bush called for a temporary surge in U.S. troop presence: To help the Iraqis implement their own stabilization plan now," and to "give Iraq some breathing room to move forward with political reconciliation." However, the "Iraqis have to lead and protect themselves." Last weekend, Ambassador McCaw continues, she was "fortunate to be able to travel on Austrian Airlines' official inaugural flight to Erbil, in northern Iraq," together with an Austrian business delegation and Austrian and international journalists. It was "a fascinating trip," the Ambassador says, noting in particular as "promising developments" the "optimism in Northern Iraq," the "building boom," the "energy and the progress in Erbil." Ambassador McCaw also pointed out that, as the "first European commercial provider with regularly scheduled service to Erbil, Austrian Airlines is helping facilitate the economic development so critical to Iraqi reconstruction and stability. Austria's contribution in opening a gateway to this vital area, through which people, capital and ideas can flow," hopefully will "lead to greater Austrian and international business involvement." The developments in Erbil "show what Iraqis can do in an environment of relative peace and security, and with the support of the international community." Failure in Iraq, the Ambassador warned, would have "terrible consequences, most of all for Iraqi citizens, but also for the region, for the United States and for our allies. The war on terror would become even more difficult, and the whole region could be destabilized. A more secure Iraq means a more secure Middle East."

#### McCaw Urges Greater Austrian Efforts in Iraq

15. The Austrian Press Agency quotes US Ambassador to Austria Susan McCaw as urging Austria to play a more decisive role in international reconstruction efforts in the northern Iraqi region of Kurdistan.

In a report, Austrian Press Agency APA explains that although the autonomous Kurdish region in northern Iraq, unlike the rest of the country, is experiencing economic growth, unemployment is still high and the infrastructure poor. US Ambassador to Austria Susan McCaw, who visited the Kurdish city Erbil last weekend, told APA that "investment is necessary to create jobs." Austria can "play a role in rebuilding Iraq," the Ambassador emphasized, adding that the United States would welcome a greater Austrian and European commitment in reconstruction efforts, in order to facilitate stability in Iraq. On the sidelines of a press conference in Erbil, the US Ambassador suggested that in 20 years time, US President Bush will perhaps be seen as someone who had brought stability to the region, APA quotes.

#### Austrian Army Helps in Davos

16. The Austrian military is helping the Swiss Air Force patrol airspace around the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. Lieutenant General Guenter Hoefler, a spokesman for the military, said while there was no direct threat of a terrorist attack, it was something that could not be ruled out. Twelve aircraft and thirteen helicopters are involved in the operation in both Swiss and Austrian airspace. Political and business leaders from around the world have gathered in the Swiss mountain resort for the annual forum, says semi-official daily Wiener Zeitung.

17. United Nations special envoy on Kosovo Martti Ahtisaari will present proposals for the future status of the province in Vienna today. In a closed-door meeting, he will brief the contact group made up of Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Russia and the US. Details of Ahtisaari's presentation will not be made public until he presents them in Belgrade and Pristina on February 6. It is believed, however, that the special envoy will recommend a form of limited independence for the province.

ORF radio early morning news Morgenjournal, reporting on the upcoming presentation by UN envoy Martti Ahtisaari of the proposals for the future status of Kosovo province in Belgrade and Pristina in early February, states that, at this point, "it is not clear whether Serbia and Kosovo will launch negotiations on the issue again, or whether they will simply have to accept what they are being offered. This is another issue Ahtisaari will debate with the contact group's representatives in Vienna today. After the previous, drawn-out status negotiations between Serbia and Kosovo everyone is aware that the biggest problem will be approval from both sides. For the Serbs independence is out of the question, but the Kosovars want just that. That is why Ahtisaari will most likely propose a compromise: an autonomous Kosovo under the supervision of an EU representative. The UN Security Council will have the final say on the issue in March, where both parties have powerful friends: While Kosovo has the US and Britain on its side, Serbia is banking on support from Russia."

#### Curfew in Beirut

18. A curfew was imposed in the Lebanese capital Beirut last night, after clashes between Hezbollah and government supporters. Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah urged his supporters to observe the curfew. At least four people were killed and about 150 injured before the army dispersed rioters. At a donors' conference in Paris, meanwhile, more than 7.6 billion dollars in grants and loans have been pledged to rebuild Lebanon's economy.

Like all Austrian media, semi-official daily Wiener Zeitung reports on the international donors' conference for Lebanon, which was held in Paris on Thursday and raised a "record relief package for Lebanon." Austria has pledged one million Euros, the daily notes. Austrian Foreign Minister Ursula Plassnik, who attended the Paris

conference, explained that the sum would be allocated for United Nations projects aimed at improving the situation of refugees. Austria would also provide financial aid in support of the reform process, Plassnik added.

#### NATO to Discuss Afghanistan

19. NATO foreign ministers are meeting in Brussels today to discuss committing more forces to the offensive against the Taliban in Afghanistan. Taliban resurgence has brought about the heaviest fighting and the highest number of casualties since 2001. Ahead of the meeting, the United States said it would spend an extra 10 million dollars on Afghanistan. US Assistant Secretary of State Richard Boucher stressed Washington's decision to step up its efforts there, and added the US wants other NATO members also to increase their efforts, ORF radio early morning news Morgenjournal reports.  
Kilner